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Before the CIA

by M. R. D. Foot

OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency, by R. Harris Smith (University of California, £3.95).

This book presents a very solid history of an often disputed theme. Its author, too young to have served in OSS himself, spent a short time in CIA, but left it to lecture in political science in California. While in CIA he found out enough about its predecessor the Office of Strategic Services to want to write on it; and now produces as thorough a study as can be made of such a body without access to its own archives. His main sources are the memories of surviving participants, some of them most forthcoming and a host of other people's books, varying as widely in their reliability as do books written about SOE.

There are many analogies between OSS and SOE; not surprisingly as the British body provided one of the models for the American. Their total strengths, about 13,000 men and women each, were nearly the same. Both were trying to do the same sort of thing: work in enemy territory to organise sabotage, disruption, and resistance. OSS, not formed until 1942, had a broader mission than SOE for it included espionage and propaganda among its tasks. Both roused the same sort of antagonism among older-established bodies such as the other armed services, the Diplomatic Corps and the security services.

Both employed brilliant amateurs brought in from the worlds of business, learning, and entertainment.

Both included men who did well for themselves after the war — Mr Harris Smith keeps dropping names of millionaires along with those of generals and professors, in his footnote explaining what happened to the survivors afterwards. Both had some fearsome scandals; we have here the original in Berlin in 1945, of the "M and M Enterprises" of Heller's "Catch-22." And both were wound up soon after the war.

Little or nothing that OSS did could be dissociated from politics; this gives a political historian plenty to discuss. Among his most interesting chapters are those on Italy and on the Far East. In the Italian case, rivalries with other Allied services; the role of the Mafia, dubious as always; divisions within OSS itself, of which the author makes no secret, and the complexities inherent in the Italian attempt to change sides in the war, led to a stupendous muddle.

In East Asia, the Americans found themselves fighting a war with more sides than the customary two. They were against the Japanese; they were also against restoring British or French imperialism. They supported Chiang Kai-shek's regime in China; yet evidence suggested they might get better results against the Japanese from Chiang's enemy, Mao Tse-tung. Americans on the spot admired the prospects held out for Indo-China by a frail old man whose life an OSS doctor saved; Ho Chi Minh.

Mr Harris Smith closes with a plea for a renewal of "the OSS passion for democratic dissent" in the successor agency, lest "the reality of CIA may soon coincide with its sinister image in the intellectual community."

P-Smith, R. Harris

See 4.01.2 OSS: The Secret History of America's First CIA.